



Building the Trans-Canada Railroad

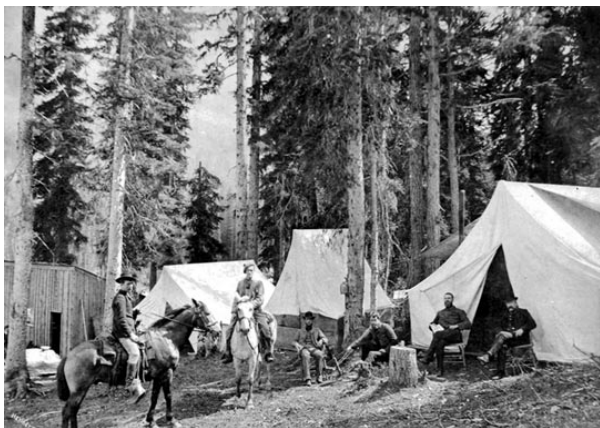
The Politics

It was the dream of Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald to build a railway from Montreal to the Pacific Ocean. In 1868 the people of British Columbia liked this idea because many were having trouble making money after the end of the gold rush. So, on July 20th, 1871 the colony of BC joined Canada with the promise that the railroad would be built. The people of BC were happy to join Canada because they were given money to pay debts they owed. The Canadian government was happy as they no longer had to worry that BC would become part of the U.S.

To help fund the building of the railroad, Macdonald found a private group called the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) to be a partner. The estimated cost for building the line was \$100,000,000. The CPR would pay for the railroad construction and then own the railroad. William Van Horne was hired by the CPR to oversee the job.

Surveying the Land

It took 10 years of surveying to determine the best route across Canada. Survey crews crossed the country looking for the cheapest and most direct way for the tracks to be laid. Survey crews lived in tents as they crossed mountains and prairies and were away from their families for months or years.



Engineer survey party in BC 1883.
Courtesy of Canadian Pacific Archives



CPR officials in 1894; including Sir William Van Horne in the centre.

The work was dangerous, the weather often very cold and there was little food. Many surveyors got frostbite or scurvy, were attacked by grizzly bears, died in fires or drowned.

There were at least six places in BC where surveyors thought the railroad could end. Many people wanted their city to be the end of the line because they knew it meant their city would grow and make money. After a lot of debate, Port Moody was chosen as the Western terminus.

Laying Track

Construction began on the track from the East in Montreal and from the West in Port Moody. To lay the track, crews had to cut trees and clear a wide area along the path made by surveyors. Then teams of animals pulled scrapers and plows to level the track bed. Other crews built bridges and trestles across rivers and canyons. Blasting crews used dynamite to blast through rock. Track-laying crews laid ties across the bed with steel rails on either side and hammered iron spikes on either side of the rails. Lastly, gravel was poured on it to hold it all in place.



Track laying machine. Courtesy of the Canadian Pacific Archives



Lieutenant-Governor Edgar Dewdney, Chief Piapot and his warriors, and the Montreal Garrison Artillery, Regina, Saskatchewan, 1885
Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada

another reserve to make way for the railroad, they were not happy. In the Spring of 1885 they rebelled against the Canadian government to keep their land. To put down this rebellion the government sent troops from across Canada and the CPR helped by sending 3000 troops on the new railroad. The rebellion continued for a few months with Louis Riel leading different groups of Metis, Cree, Blackfoot, Blood, Peigan and Saulteaux. Outnumbered by government troops, they eventually lost and were put in prison and their families moved to new reservations. Louis Riel was found guilty and hanged for his actions against the government.

The Northwest Rebellion

In the 1880s, First Nations and Metis groups in the Canadian prairies were not all happy to have the train coming through their land. They had heard about the railroad in the US and seen how it had helped bring death to many of the buffalo they depended on for food and shelter. Since the buffalo were harder to find, many of the First Nations had settled in one place and began a life of farming. So when the CPR wanted to move them to



Louis Riel



Chinese railway workers

Chinese Workers in BC

In 1879 work began on one of the hardest and most costly parts to build—the Fraser Canyon section. To build 15 tunnels through the mountains, they needed 7,000 workers, over 6,000 of which were Chinese. Chinese workers were paid \$1 a day and had to pay for their own equipment, while white labourers were paid \$1.50—\$1.75 a day and were

given equipment. Chinese workers were often given the most dangerous jobs, such as blasting, causing death for many. It is estimated that four Chinese workers died for each mile through the Fraser Canyon. Men also died from poor eating, sickness, poor clothing and poor working conditions.

The Last Spike & First Train

On Nov. 7th, 1885, the track being built from the East and the track being built from the West met in Craigellachie, BC. A group of CPR directors, employees and workmen came to drive in the last spike. The honor of hammering the final spike was given to the eldest CPR director present, Donald A. Smith. General manager William Van Horne was also there.

Many people think the last spike was made of gold like the American transcontinental railroad's last spike. Although the Governor

General meant to bring a silver spike, bad weather prevented him from coming.

Thus, the last spike was made from iron just as all the other were. It took two tries to hammer the spike in correctly. The first spike bent and a second one was needed. Pieces of the bent track were later made into jewelry. After the ceremony, the CPR officials got on a train from Montreal and rode into Port Moody the next day.

It wasn't until July 4th, 1886 that the first passenger train arrived. It took the 150 passengers 5 days and 19 hours to make the journey but they still arrived on time.



Hammering the Last Spike



Arrival of the First Train from Montreal in Port Moody

After the Construction

It took 30,000 workers 4½ years to build 3200km of track across Canada. When they finished, many Chinese workers were fired on the spot and forced to find their way out of the Fraser Canyon. Many of these workers settled in BC and helped create towns across the Lower Mainland.



Sir John A. MacDonald and Lady Agnes Macdonald
on their way to the Pacific Coast in 1886.

Prime Minister Macdonald's big day came on July 9th, 1886 when he and his wife rode a special train from Ottawa to British Columbia. His wife Agnes Macdonald was so thrilled by the views in BC that she rode the cow catcher on the front of the train for many miles (despite the pleas of railroad officials).

Extending the Line

Unfortunately for the past residents of Port Moody, the honour of being the Western terminus of the railroad was short. By 1886, the Canadian Pacific Railway Company had decided to extend the line further to the West to Vancouver. Wealthy landowners in Vancouver offered the CPR large amount of land in exchange to extending the line. The new line was completed in 1887 with Vancouver the last stop. Port Moody went back to being a small working town and stayed that way for many years.

Sources

[The Story of the Canadian Pacific Railway](http://www8.cpr.ca/cms/nr/cprinternet/images/cprchildrenshistory.pdf) by the CPR available online at www8.cpr.ca/cms/nr/cprinternet/images/cprchildrenshistory.pdf

[The Kids Book of Canada's Railway and How the CPR was Built](#) by Deborah Hodge

[Van Horne's Road](#) by Omer Lavallee

